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Dr. Van Tassel

Human Nature: Paradox, Mystery, Acceptance

PART I

On the first day of class Dr. Van Tassel asked us, “What does it mean to be human?” Reflecting on my participation in this course, I have learned a plethora of ways to explore the human condition. To make the course makes sense, initiating the investigation via Steven Pinker’s *The Blank Slate* was appropriate because his academic prose ignited the conflict that rests in the heart of this course. Believing there is biological reasoning behind our interaction with one another, he negates *Tabula Rasa,* however defending it nonetheless in more current issues like determinism. Of course, there will be authors who would disagree with Pinker, Susan Griffin and Patricia Limerick specifically. They believed because history, rather than biological reasoning, we are who we are through experiences. Their metaphorical, figurative prose allowed the reader to comprehend other authors like Leslie Silko, author of *Storyteller,* and Toni Morrison, who published *Beloved.* Now, Morrison explores the way in which fear, solitude, and past events shape human experiences, rather than history itself. Protagonist Sethe’s struggle to escape her slavery past has taught us that relationships with one another, and ultimately finding solace is the key to their transformation. With solace, we dive into Gretel Ehrlich’s *The Solace of Open Spaces.* Because she lost her husband—the motif behind settling down to a rural society—her specificity in her narrative contributes to the overall concreteness in her stories. Through all these selections we explored the first half of the term, I conjecture the commonality all shared is human’s use of tangible evidence in attempt to find a universal. Once we explore the other selections investigated the second half of the term, however, one can see why these books relate closer than the ones stated prior.

PART II

As we learn that humans are multifaceted, many authors and their publications (which will be discussed later throughout this essay) have also found ways to explore the humanistic endeavors that have defined us. Stated prior, we have investigated the human condition through mere academia: biology, history, politics, etc. However, rather attempting to find a universal of our interactions with one another tangibly, this next section will explore human nature by using the right side of our brain. We all know there is a nuance between knowledge and faith, but our struggle and difficulty to coincide each is the drive for this essay. As I personally believe evidence such as faith takes a step back from finding our universal due to the absence of tangible proof, there is still hope to finding that unity.

Similar to the first half of the course, we have to develop a sufficient starting point in our study. How so one may ask? Matt Ridley’s *The Origin of Virtue.* Ridley explores human nature via human sociobiology, meaning how our interactions, decision making, and other activities alongside with our genetics contribute to our evolution. Similar to Steven Pinker, Ridley’s academic prose furthers what it truly means to be human. Ridley expands the investigation Prince Peter Kropotkin attempted: our “selfish gene.” Although Kropotkin centralized his argument around mutual aid, Ridley places the “selfish gene” Kropotkin theorized into ideas such as altruism, reciprocity, morality, and other topics in order to universalize the human condition. From this, Ridley then compares human society to the insect world, using the ant nest and beehive specifically. To make his argument convincing, Ridley tended to anthropomorphize their “society.” To me, I believe it is not justifiable to relate insects with human characteristics because we do not necessarily know how the insects are feeling. I understand we do this for the betterment of ourselves metaphorically, but in conclusion, it is invalid. Besides this minor problem, this extended metaphor not only progresses the meaning of human nature, but it also leads us toward our purpose in life: harmony (12). Ridley emphasizes the importance of harmony through our evolutionary progress. Essentially, we all know that we all need to get along so that we can survive. However, actions speak louder than words. Ridley expressed how free-loaders, the ones who do not do anything, receive equal credit to those who put their heart and soul into the specific deed. Although this stirs argumentation, the overall point is that we still need everyone to work together. Furthermore, Ridley wants us to put aside the notion we are multifaceted because being united as a whole is more important towards our ultimate goal of survival.

Another idea Ridley points out is how dependent we are. He expresses this idea through our cells. I believe Ridley centralized many of his arguments with miniscule objects such as cells because cells share the same desire humans do: working together. And because of this relationship cells have with humans, Ridley’s description correlates with Susan Griffin’s “Our Secret”. Although it is correct to say humans depend on each other, as Pinker noted our interactions derived from other’s thoughts from the past, Ridley brings a new question the reader has to investigate: our selfishness. One can argue that being selfish is a negative trait due to interpretation on the term; selfishness shows that the person is individualistic, self-centered, and/or not willing to interact with others. However, as Ridley points out, someone that is being selfless—or altruistic—is overall selfish due to the innate, unconscious expectancy to get something back in return, as the idiom goes: “I’ll scratch your back, you scratch mine.” This sense of reciprocity has both helped and hindered us. He supports this by a mother and her fetus. Ridley theorizes the fetus is obviously dependent on the mother for nutritional value, and the mother depends on the fetus to carry out half of her genes. He then concludes both the mother and the fetus are unconsciously selfish. But a new argument initiates: is selfishness a vital tool all humans need to survive? To me, selfishness is appropriate on a biological standpoint. Innately, we want to survive—as I have been consistently stating throughout this paper. The will to abide the survival of the fittest shows selfishness, however it is important to the human condition. On individualistic terms, wanting to survive is the primary goals we all strive for.

With this unconscious desire to survive, our selfishness allows us to discover more about ourselves. *Wit*, a play created by Margaret Edson, takes focus through an English professor who is close to her death. Having ovarian cancer, Vivian Bearing sets the mood to what the reader will explore during this witty journey. This play offers a new route into what can help us define ourselves. In this play, Edson explores human nature by means of theology. Edson makes the reader fully aware through faithfulness and suffering, human nature and our ability to adapt in our environment can be easily achieved. A possible theory Edson wanted to get the reader to understand in this play is that science—or pure intellectualism—is not the only answer to solving our mysteries, or in this case, the paradox of a universal meaning of human nature. There can be different interpretations that people can explore to find their meaning of how we act, and this play is successful in doing so.

As the reader begins to understand who Vivian truly is, or understanding what exactly has inspired her, the reader notices an explicit correlation between Vivian’s chemotherapy and the poems she recites throughout the play. Because Vivian is a devotee of John Donne, a poet who is highly credited for incorporating “wit” into poetic pieces, one of his poems, “Hymn to God, My God in My Sickness” directly ties all the characters in this play to Vivian’s transformation through this death-threatening hardship. As John Sykes analyzes this play as well through theological argumentation, he believes that the doctor’s relationship with Vivian is symbolized in lines 6-10. Because of this understanding of relationships, the reader can notice Vivian’s transformation. As long as an outside force is assisting that individual who is undergoing hardship and/or tribulation, the vulnerable victim could possibly overcome whatever he or she is going through. Whether the individual is there mentally or physically, that person and their involvement play an important role into a transformation.

Similarly, this act of assistance through relationships has been evident in previous pieces of literature we have already explored. In novels like *Beloved*, where Sethe’s family is trying to escape their slavery past, there is that similar correlation. Now in *Beloved,* the suffering issue is stretched into ways that are incomparable to *Wit* due to its setting; but still, the universal that the characters like Denver and Sethe found their inner happiness and solace through guidance can be related back to Vivian. Also, this bond Vivian unconsciously develops with the doctors can relate to Leslie Silko’s *Storyteller.* Since the Laguna tribe was not willing to allow Christian influence to culturally effect their lifestyles and practices (though spirituality is an important part of their lives), this storytelling piece depicts ways these individuals transformed as result of radical changes, which is what Vivian is struggling all throughout this play.

This transformation—in Vivian’s case—is her faithfulness towards God. The reader obviously knows that Vivian will not survive this cancer, as well as her doctors; however, the reader notices an emotional shift in her view on life. Towards the closing scenes of the play, Vivian is told she will not survive this ovarian cancer. Ironically, this notification gives her the volition to subside her callousness towards her doctors by being able to engage in a conversation with them. Through laughter and minor hope, Vivian begins to ponder simplistically (58). This simplicity is important because throughout the entire play, Vivian was struggling to accept that life itself was simple, rather complex like John Donne’s poems. With this simplistic mind-set, she then becomes more faithful. Theologically, this notion relates directly back to the Donne’s poem stated prior. As the ovarian cancer is finally taking over, her death is then succeeded by a miraculous resurrection. Edson abruptly ends the play as Vivian goes completely naked and walks slowly towards an indefinable light. This could possibly show that through pain and suffering, God was ultimately there for her, in this case resurrecting her from the dead. As Sykes notes as well, we need to be hurt and endure suffering in order to receive God’s grace, and significantly, Vivian was able to accept it.

Now that we are bringing in God’s grace into the discussion, I can introduce another selection we have studied. *Between Noon and Three,* written by Robert Farrar Capon, is an allegory that investigates how simple theological notions like grace are in fact vital to our overall findings of human nature. Capon believes our intake on grace has halted our pursuit of happiness. Through this selection, Capon accesses the true meaning of grace.

With a C.S. Lewis-like prose, Capon begins his “journey” on grace through a parable. A promiscuous English professor, Paul, has an affair with one of his graduate students, Laura. As we learn more about these two characters, the premise is that it does not matter how sinful or horrible a person innately is, as long as one accepts God’s grace, her or she will be accepted. Capon draws on the fact that “grace cannot prevail until law is dead. There is no way of seeing clearly the freedom to which we are being driven until morality has been bound, gagged, and stuffed unceremoniously in the trunk” (6). One can state that provisions such as laws restrict humans, Capon’s main point he wanted the reader to comprehend is that anything we do, grace will never be revoked. However, there is a dilemma to this suggestion. Capon stated that humans have a hard time conceptualizing grace. This may be due to how truly dictated we are by the law. Laws sets parameters and restrictions on what we can do.

Capon poses an enlightened question at the beginning of the book, “What would you do with freedom if you had it” (6). Because we never experienced freedom, we tend to imagine the worst of people when given the chance to have supreme power and choice. With no consequences or higher power to answer to, the actions of humans are limitless. This is where grace comes in. We all know that we are sinful, and we do things that are not good for us, but as long as we accept God’s grace, like Vivian did in *Wit*, we will be content with ourselves. This is where the struggle between knowledge and faith comes in. It is obvious that we cannot prove how great grace is for each person; our multifacedness hinders this attempted universal because it varies on each person. Capon’s parable also conflicts with Ridley’s thesis in *The Origin of Virtue.* One can state that this parable is disturbing due to the notion that this professor does not deserve grace because he committed adultery. However, as we stated prior, Ridley (a secularist), has a hard time defining grace because ultimately, what we truly care about is survival.

Where Vivian had to discover herself through hardship, and Paul receiving Laura’s grace, we have found other ways to define ourselves. Anne Truitt, the author of *Daybook*, journals her life in a way in which the reader can comprehend a more in depth understanding of what it means to be human. Although this selection is not argument prose such as Steven Pinker’s *The Blank Slate,* or Matt Ridley’s *The Origin of Virtue,* we still see a progression in this paradoxical understanding of human nature. Through these journal selections, Truitt discovers herself, and also provides us a possible contribution to an overall universal of our humanistic endeavors.

As she writes these journals, her topics change quite often; one day it may be a pastime memory, the present where she is doing her sculpting, or just a generalization she has about the human condition. However, there is a set-in-stone commonality that all of these subjects of topics share: it exploits our ability in a way that does not derive from a natural science, meaning we are learning human nature by creativity. This expressionist interpretation allows the reader to see the “artistic” aspect of what it means to be human, rather initiating another argument. We need creativity to understand ourselves better. When we started our discussion on this book, we were asked, “What is art, how does it define you?” Although this question is very broad, everyone’s answers showed how unique we are. The way we view art varies, which is what Truitt was ultimately trying to get out from her journals. I also believe what Truitt was attempting to achieve through her diary was the notion that although humans are multifaceted, we adapt better in our comfort zones; therefore, Truitt’s comfort zone, or solace rather, was most definitely through her art. The way she explains her work, her comfort of her joy in life allows us to take a break from finding a universal. We should allow our answers naturally come to us rather than forcing ourselves to find it.

As stated prior, Anne Truitt develops a better understanding of herself as she writes her journals. All of her trips from Tokyo, Japan; Yaddo, New York; and Washington D.C., Truitt’s art progressively transformed into a life of their own (82). As Truitt describes her sculptures, this picturesqueness of these works had me relate back to Margaret Edson’s *Wit.* Throughout the entire play, protagonist Vivian is struggling to live life to the fullest—more specifically a more purposeful life. Because she fears death, she really does not want to fulfill all of what life offers; however this ovarian cancer is the realization that all humans must undergo death; death is the ultimate event everyone has to endure. Truitt seems to address explicitly what Vivian must discover: that there is not just one way to live—not just one person to be. We are multifaceted beings. With her transformation by being more faithful, her miraculous resurrection makes Truitt’s interpretation of human nature evident, that life can exist in different variations.

Part III

Similar to the selections we read before midterm, the authors we explored the second half of the term had ideas that conflicted with one another, however, many of the concepts made sense to me—for the most part. Reflecting back, the hardest piece I had to deal with was most definitely Robert Farrar Capon’s *Between Noon and Three.* There was something about this piece I could not comprehend. I could not accept faith being appropriate enough to prove an important contribution to the human condition. The publication I felt most compelling was Anne Truitt’s *Daybook*, ironically*.* I say “ironically” because at first, I thought I was not going to find this selection as compelling as publications like Ridley’s *The Origin of Virtue*. I felt with Ridley, his argument came natural to me, meaning his thesis was appropriate. Initially, because I am not so fond with art, I figured Truitt’s *Daybook* would be a waste of time reading.

Part IV

What we can get out of this is that human nature can still be interpreted differently; therefore there is not just one definite answer. Although this paradox still prevails due to how multifaceted we are, branching out into different ideas can possibly be helpful towards this universal we are striving so badly to achieve. The notion that there is not a clear, cut out definition of human nature is true, but with this creative, faithful, and/or imaginable intake on current topics such as our condition, we can now explore our humanistic endeavors in a whole new way. I also believe human nature itself is the combination of everything that defines oneself, meaning it varies on the person. Depending on how intellectual or creative one is, the human nature of that person will be different from the other. I find it fascinating to investigate our human condition because how subterranean the topic is. In current society, we do not see this publicized on the newscasts, or documentaries, just through books. The fact that I have read many different views on this topic makes me feel I am in overall contributing towards the universal because of my intake on these selections. We all know that humans are a very complex; however, by discovering new methods, interpretations, and appropriate theories, we are making this endeavor more simplistic.